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THE SUCCESSFUL RHODODENDRON BED

By Harlan P. Kelsey

This includes Rhododendrons, Kalmias, Azaleas, Leucothoes, Blueberries and other ericaceous genera, and similar native and exotic plants and often such "fillers" as Ferns, Lilies, etc., most of which delight in acid soil conditions, and which are usually grouped together to make what is termed the "Rhododendron Bed."

This class of plants is most at home in somewhat shady and damp situations, and in a porous soil supplying plenty of humus and always showing more or less acid reaction. Limestone (*alkaline*) soils must be avoided, as a majority of ericaceous plants (*Rhododendrons, Azaleas, Blueberries, etc.*) are rarely if ever found growing naturally under such soil conditions. Sandy loam is favorable, but in all cases continuous supply of humus should be provided.

Mulching. This means that the Rhododendron bed should have annually a heavy mulch of *hardwood* leaves, which is left on the year round to decay. Mulching also keeps the ground cool in summer and warm in winter and protects the fine feeding rootlets of the plants. *Removing the mulching in spring to make the beds "look better" is one of the greatest causes of non-success in growing Rhododendrons and similar plants. No expert gardener would ever think of so doing.*

Preparation of Bed. Unless conditions are naturally favorable, excavate 2 to 3 feet and fill with woods mold, "Kalmia peat," good loam, rotted field-sods, and perhaps a third in bulk of swamp muck or peat, or similar soils. Make a tenth part of the mixture sharp sand, especially where the soil is too clayey. The center of the bed or plantation may be raised 6 to 12 inches above surrounding ground, after allowing for natural settling.

Planting. Plant the same depth as before (shown by earth line, or "collar" on stem) and firmly press soil around roots with the foot, but don't pack the earth too solid—Rhododendrons are not telegraph poles. "Fillers," including Lilies and other bulbs and smaller ground-covering species, should be planted after the larger plants are all in and properly spaced. Then *soak* the ground and apply the mulching.

Winter Protection. If convenient, protect them with pine or other evergreen boughs, particularly where exposed to the sun and wind; yet Rhododendrons rarely suffer in the latitude of Boston or Buffalo, if properly planted and mulched. In the latitude of Ottawa and Quebec, Canada, a board fencing may be placed around the edge of the bed and much heavier temporary mulching of straw, etc., filled in almost or quite to the tops of the plants. It is rarely necessary to build a board cover, except on southern exposures to prevent sunburn, or with tender varieties not suitable for general planting, and even then evergreen boughs are preferable. Good ventilation must be provided.

Selecting the Location. For the Rhododendron bed, a northern exposure is preferable, especially in low elevation in the South, or elsewhere where freezing and thawing is quite continual. A direct winter sun on the frozen leaves of any broadleaf evergreen often kills outright or spoils the foliage. The north side of the building, wall, woods or hill is always preferable, and windswept locations should be avoided, unless proper measures are taken to check the heavy winds.

In Limestone Soils. Excavation is imperative and fresh soil showing acid reaction substituted. This can be successfully done. A striking example is shown in Highland Park, Rochester, New York, where one of the most beautiful Rhododendron and Azalea beds in America has been constructed and planted in a location originally of a heavy limestone nature. Blueberry culture is not a success in limestone soils.

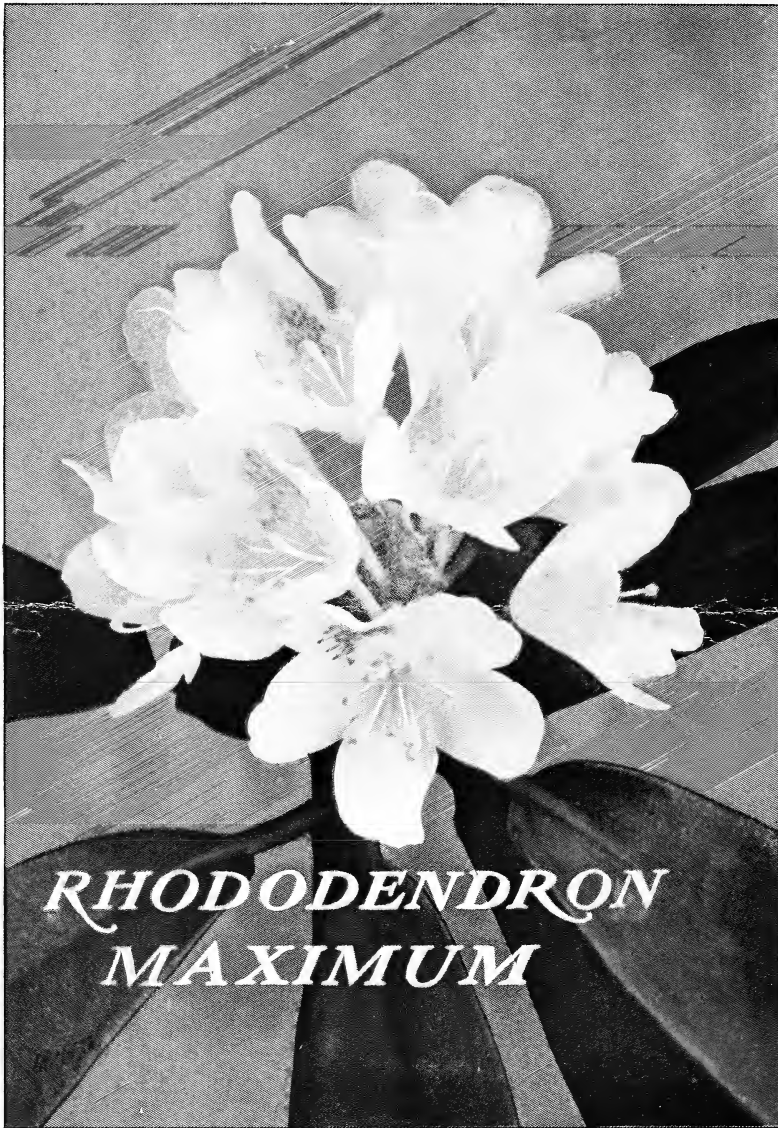
Enemies of the Rhododendron. Rhododendrons, Kalmias and similar plants have few enemies. The only serious one I know is the Lace-wing Fly, which is native from New England throughout the Alleghanies, and is found on *Kalmia angustifolia*, *Rhododendron maximum*, *Kalmia latifolia* and occasionally on almost any broadleaf evergreen or deciduous tree or shrub. This pest appears in early spring on the under side of the leaves and gets its sustenance by sucking the sap. The leaves turn brown, giving the plant a ragged, unkempt appearance. It is easily disposed of by spraying the under side of the leaves, using a very fine nozzle, with an emulsion of ten gallons of whale-oil soap to one hundred gallons of water. While the Lace-wing Fly is more at home on *Rhododendron maximum*, it does not hesitate to attack all other species to a greater or less extent. Plants in the shade are rarely infested to any great degree.

The Use of "Fillers." For the best landscape effects, as well as providing a continual succession of bloom throughout the season, and actually protecting the Rhododendrons and supplying "feathered" edge to the ground, a large variety of shrubs and plants may be employed with the finest results. In fact, the planting of Rhododendrons without the use of "filler" or "edging" plants may give harsh, formal effects, which are neither desirable nor natural in any way. In the use of "fillers" great care must be taken as to

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time of blooming and color effects, so they do not clash. It is surprising how many "filler" plants can be used without detracting from the broad evergreen effect, and yet supplying an amazing amount of interesting detail and a continuous show of blossoms against a beautiful Rhododendron leaf background.

Some of the Best "Fillers" and "Edging" Plants. *Andromeda polifolia*, *Chamaedaphne calyculata* (Leatherleaf), *Leiophyllum buxifolium*, *L. prostratum*, *Ilex glabra* (Inkberry), *Leucothoe catesbaei*, *Pieris floribunda*, *Taxus canadensis* (Canada Yew), *Galax aphylla*, *Gaultheria procumbens*, *Houstonia* (Bluets), *Mitchella repens*



(Partridgeberry), *Shortia galacifolia* (Oconee-bells), *Vinca minor* (Periwinkle), *Zanthorhiza apiifolia* (Yellowroot), Lilies, Trilliums, Erythroniums (Dogtooth Violets), Ferns in great variety, Violets, *Dicentra eximia* (Fern Bleedingheart), Iris in great variety, particularly pseudacorus and Japanese; Azaleas in variety; *Ilex verticillata*, Aronias (Chokeberry) in variety and many other "berry-bearing" shrubs.

Jonquils and other spring bulbs may be used freely in the borders of plantations with charming results.

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